

Agriculture Minister bats for GM crops

OUR BUREAU

New Delhi, February 13

Lending vocal support to genetically modified (GM) crops, Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh on Friday said that technologically enhanced seeds could help India realise its food security goals.

"While agriculture feeds the nation, seeds feed agriculture... Bt cotton in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu has clearly demonstrated what these new technologies can do to boost farmer incomes," Singh said at the 'Indian Seed Congress 2015' held in Agra.

He pointed out that agricultural incomes could rise further when technologies, such as herbicide-tolerance, drought-tolerance, nitrogen use efficiency, etc are introduced commercially in India.

"Losses that occur due to droughts, floods, salinity, biotic and other abiotic stresses also need to be eliminated decisively through the adoption of appropriate technologies. In this context, genetic engineering holds great promise," he added.

Singh's statement follows 'no objection certificates' granted by the Maharashtra government



Radha Mohan Singh, Agriculture Minister

for field trials of transgenic varieties in four crop lines (brinjal, cotton, chickpea and rice) last month.

Shifting attitude

Earlier this week, Karnataka Biotechnology and IT Minister SR Patil also batted for field trials in his State.

Companies seeking to undertake open field trials of GM varieties need to obtain clearances from the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) - a body under the Environment Ministry - as well as 'no objection certificates' from State governments. Maharashtra joined States such as Andhra Pradesh, Haryana and Punjab that had allowed field trials earlier.

Last year, the GEAC gave clearances for field trials of 15 crop varieties. A moratorium was imposed on the commercial re-

lease of Bt brinjal in February 2010.

Currently, commercial cultivation has only been permitted for GM cotton varieties that use Bt technology, which protects the crop from bollworm.

Government support

"Superior genetics encapsulated in seed combined with improved agronomies shall be the key strategy to break the yield barriers...Government shall, therefore, support public-private partnership initiatives for development of the sector," said Singh.

The Indian seed industry is growing at 15 per cent, the Minister said, double the global average. In terms of GM crop coverage, India ranked fourth, behind the US, Brazil and Argentina.

"In 2013-14 alone, Indian farmers who planted Bt Cotton earned a monetary benefit of approximately ₹12,000 crore. Going forward, the focus of the seed industry is to ensure a substantial increase in farm productivity to meet India's food security requirements," said Ram Kaundinya, Director General, Association of Biotechnology Led Enterprises-Agriculture Group.